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The mirror within the mirror: Reflections on multiculturalism, theory and practice

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to explore the ways in which adult education graduate students' perceptions of race, class, gender and sexual orientation were transformed by the end of graduate adult education courses which included readings, reflection, discussions and other activities designed to foster self-awareness, critical reflection, and cultural sensitivity.

As many sources have reported (i.e. Morganthau, 1997; US Census Bureau, 1992), by 2050 White Americans will make up approximately 53% of the population while Hispanics, African, Native and Asian Americans and other minorities will comprise the rest of American society. This growing diversity has stimulated discourse at AERC and other conferences and forums concerning the roles professional adult educators should play in introducing issues concerning diversity and fostering multicultural awareness among their graduate students. Critical voices within adult education call attention to the fields continued neglect of the historical issues of power (Colin III, 1994; Hugo, 1990, Cunningham, 1989) and marginalization (Tisdell, 1993). Adult education as a field of practice claims that the experiences of learners are critical to effective practice (Mezirow, 1991; Knowles, 1980). However, the practice has until recently ignored the importance of ethnic, gender, race and sexual orientation as they relate to culture and power interactions within curriculum theory and classroom practice. Since adult education graduate courses should provide training for adult educators who interact with the larger diverse population of learners, curriculum should incorporate readings, reflection and discussions concerning the important issues of race, class and gender, sexual orientation (Bailey, Tisdell, & Cervero, 1994; Cunningham, 1989).

The important issue of helping adult educators become aware of the diversity of adult learners is an historical one. In an Outline of an Emerging Field: Adult Education, Hallenbeck (1964) wrote that missing in adult education literature were "housewives, Negroes, unskilled workers and the elderly" (p. 17). What Hallenbeck failed to acknowledge were the missing voices of a variety of ethnic groups and cultures beyond "Negroes" also excluded in adult education literature. The

challenges now facing adult education professors are the concrete actions involved in restructuring their practice to mirror our increasingly multicultural nation. One of the implications for adult education curriculum reform is change in meaning making by students within graduate adult education classrooms. The purpose of this study is to explore the ways in which adult education multicultural courses changed or transformed graduate students' perceptions of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation when the courses included readings, reflection, discussions and other activities designed to foster self-awareness, critical reflection, and cultural sensitivity.

Review of the Literature

We based our perspective upon a combination of transformative adult learning theory and multicultural development theory. Mezirow (1991) describes perspective transformation as "the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand and feel about our world, changing these structures of habitual expectation to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative perspective; and finally, making choices or otherwise acting upon these new understandings" (1991, p. 167). Because Mezirow's theory of perspective transformation focuses on individual transformation, it has been criticized by Clark and Wilson (1991) for uncritically reflecting the values of the White male middle class society and for its failure to address social change as an outcome (Collard and Law, 1989), which is a critical component of adult education.

One of the goals of multicultural education is the inclusion of other perspectives and voices in curriculum and pedagogy. In elementary, secondary and higher education, several models of inclusion of multicultural issues are well known (Banks, 1989; Sleeter & Grant, 1987; Bennett, 1986). Banks (1989) model is a stage approach which proposes that there are four levels of multicultural course content: the contributions approach, additive approach, transformative approach, and social action approach. In explaining his stages, Banks suggests that educators use more than one stage in classroom teaching, and in fact, use the stages to build upon each other. Bennett's (1986) developmental model of intercultural sensitivity theory can be used to examine how students' views of culture are transformed from a ethnocentric perspective to a broader ethnorelative perspective. Bennett's model allows educators to examine how students might move from denying differences in culture to accepting and valuing them. Sleeter and Grant (1987) contribution is a taxonomy which organizes how various multicultural scholars define multicultural education. Their classification system includes five levels: teaching the culturally different, the human relations approach, single-group studies approach, the multi-cultural education approach, education that is multicultural and social reconstructionist (1987). Sleeter and Grant provide educators with a systematic way to categorize various forms of multicultural education.

Although adult education as a field is beginning to recognize multicultural issues in curriculum and pedagogy (i.e. Tisdell, 1995; Ross-Gordan, 1994; Sheared, 1994; Tisdell & McLaurin, 1994), an inclusive model of multicultural awareness in adult education curriculum and pedagogy is lacking, specifically a model to integrate multicultural issues into graduate adult education courses. Tisdell and McLaurin (1994) examined the perspectives of faculty who included multicultural course content in higher education classes, and Ross-Gordan (1994)

probed teaching principles from feminist, multicultural, and andragogical teaching theories. However, there has been little or no studies which assess the effects of including multicultural issues in adult education courses; also lacking are specific data on how the design of multicultural curriculum and learning experiences may encourage self-awareness, critical reflection, and cultural sensitivity among graduate students. Our study attempts to fill this void by exploring and examining the ways in which adult education graduate students' perceptions of race, class, gender and sexual orientation were changed or transformed by the end of graduate adult education courses which included readings, reflections, discussions and other activities designed to foster self-awareness, critical awareness, and cultural sensitivity. Our research explored two forms of theory to practice questions. The first part of our research examined the connection between the lived experience of the students, borrowing from a phenomenological approach to gain insight into the meaning making for students in multiculturally focused adult education courses. The second part of our study explored our own reflections, as professors of adult education, about our teaching of the courses and the pedagogical methods we employed to engage students.

We entered into this study with some questions concerning how the components of the curriculum and the concrete learning experiences affect graduate adult education students' perceptions related to multicultural issues. What is the relevance of transformative theory within the social context of the multicultural issues classroom? How do learners describe their transformative experiences? Finally, what outcomes of the curriculum were viewed by both the instructors and students as transformative?

Methodology

To answer our research questions, we examined two courses in different adult education graduate programs that included readings, reflection and discourse about multicultural issues. A total of 23 graduate students of mixed ethnicity agreed to participate in this study. The courses were taught by two professors, a White female and a Black male, both graduates from the same adult education doctoral program. Our objective was to listen to graduate students' descriptions of their experiences and document the themes (Spradley, 1979) which arose from these experiences. Students provided evidence in two forms, written course evaluations and conversations with the professors. As professors, we provided evidence from reflections on our teaching, observations of students, and discourse concerning our own courses. As students' own words created a phenomenological set of meaning making structures (Patton, 1991), we compared them to the existing body of adult education theory, multicultural theory, and pedagogical and andragogical practice literature. To provide a framework for examining our own practices, we used Bank's (1989) model which assesses multicultural curriculum. We used all four levels in our approach to raising the learners' awareness; however, we did not assume that all learners would see themselves as social activists by the end of the courses.

Findings

What emerged from the learners' written and oral descriptions were the themes of insight into personal lack of awareness, new concerns for the importance of diversity which impacts their own adult education practices, and fresh ways of understanding their potential for expanding

their own and their students' thinking concerning multicultural issues. The most critical theme which emerged from the data, however, was the learners' reflections on the origins of their feelings, specifically how previously held unconscious perceptions of other cultures which potentially impacted certain populations of learners complied with societal hegemonic norms and stereotypes.

Insight into personal lack of awareness: Many of the students expressed an better understanding of "a world that is different from mine...I wonder what voices are being left-out and why." As another student said "I never had really given a lot of thought to considering how much other cultures actually influence our daily lives in the US." Students also found that "you cannot make changes if you are not at least aware of these issues." These quotes reflect the importance students placed on their heightened sensitivity to multicultural differences in American society. This sensitivity served as a catalyst to the students' own self-reflections of their experiences and increased their awareness of societal issues which were mirrored in their various adult education classrooms.

Diversity as it affects their own adult education practices: Participants within each class revealed their awareness concerning diversity as it applied to their particular adult education practice contexts. As one student explained "we are teaching a group of completely different people." This perception of "different than us" manifested itself in expressed concern that theories and notions of difference were not addressed in other graduate education classes even though the participants' adult education practices were composed of mostly minorities and/or women. Another participant expressed that "adult educators must be aware of the different views of different groups of people that comprise our...classes."

New ways of understanding and expanding their students' thinking: Participants expressed a heightened concern for understanding the adult students in their practices. As one student eloquently stated "we may live in a society of White male dominance, but we as adult educators very rarely encounter them (White males). We work with women and minorities." Another student furthered this analysis with her comment "if it has done nothing else it has made me more mindful of how I define my world and myself. ...when I walk into a classroom I must help each of those students to see the world clearly through their own eyes, not mine or anyone else's."

Awareness of Hegemonic Stereotypes: An awareness emerged that "we work with the ideals of the White male society and adult education students need to be aware of this." In their written course evaluations, students seemed to become self-aware of how their own unconscious assumptions concerning cultures "other" or different than their own mirrored hegemonic stereotypes. As one student wrote "Through a behind the scenes look' at majority mainstream assumptions, I have come to better understand the many automatic privileges a member of the predominant culture enjoys." Another student clarified his feelings this way: "I was unaware of the compounding factors of privilege and power until this class...when you don't think, you don't have to be aware."

This critical consciousness drove some students to reflect upon social justice issues or at least talk about taking actions which reflected their new self-awareness. Among the actions or

promises were: "becoming a member of the first multicultural diversity committee in my firm," "contacting my CEO to speak about the importance of cultural diversity," "being not so quick to judge and more open to differences," and "taking on an obligation to act in a fair manner."

Professors' Reflections: As researchers/professors we intentionally used Banks' four levels of multicultural curriculum in a non-linear but directional manner as we taught our classes. We recognized the variety of life experiences students brought to the courses would result in different changes in self-awareness among the students. Three major practice issues emerged from our reflections: First, mixing forms of instruction (i.e. lectures, readings, guest speakers, films, small and large group discussions, and role play exercises encouraged discourse and awareness. The diversity of the population in the classes themselves helped stimulate useful discussion. Second, structured critical writing activities challenged students on both cognitive and affective levels. These activities took the form of reflection papers on readings, speakers, and films, providing students with a forum for a personal self-dialogue and private dialogue with the professors. Finally, both of us teaching these courses were engaged in continuing education in the relationship of the overlapping social dynamics of race, class, gender, sexual orientation and power which, through their interaction within the classroom, impact multicultural adult education. We recognize that teaching these courses made us even more aware of issues of power in graduate classrooms and further recognition concerning how power is grounded in culture. Open discussions in the classrooms helped us as professors clarify and reflect upon our convictions and objectives concerning multicultural education as our students elucidated their own beliefs.

Discussion

"When you don't think, you don't have to be aware:" We believe that this statement made by one of our students poignantly states how some of the students became more critically aware of multicultural issues. Other students' statements mirror the different levels of reflection and meaning-making that occurred and was expressed during our study. As Jacobson (1996) points out, the classroom experience does present a unique context in which learning takes place. While our experiences support Mezirow's (1991) notion of the importance of fostering critical reflection in adult learners, transformative learning theory does not explain completely how participants in our study gained awareness and cultural sensitivity.

Much like Tisdell's (1993) study of classroom dynamics and students' interactions, our research shows multiple factors at work in the classroom. Because these multiple factors are what seemed to foster critical reflection and awareness of multicultural issues, it is important for adult educators to create a culture conducive to discourse while actively facilitating and restructuring learning exercises both for and with their students. The adult education graduate classroom must be seen as a social context that mirrors power inequities in larger society; therefore, professors of adult education must be active in their attempts to create multiple new experiences, an understanding of power issues, and an awareness of hegemonic and cultural norms if graduate students are to gain experiences they can apply to their own adult education practices.

Our study is significant to the field of adult education because it helps explain how graduate students' perceptions concerning race, class, gender and sexual orientation may change because

of the purposeful structured inclusion of multicultural issues in graduate level curriculum. Our action research presents a methodology that benefits practitioners and learners through advocating self-awareness, critical reflection, cultural sensitivity and renewed consciousness of the links between theory and practice. In order to prepare educators of adults to work with the larger diverse society of adult learners, we, as professors of adult education, must be proactive in addressing issues of race, class, gender and sexual orientation in our graduate classrooms.

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